In a World of Suffering

December 15, 2022

That contrast between the two chants we had just now: first, the contemplation of aging, illness, and death, how we haven’t gone beyond these things; or, as the Thai translation says, how these things are normal, the contemplation of separation from all that we love, how that’s inevitable; and then, may I be happy. It seems like a hopeless hope, but it’s not. In fact, that’s what the Buddhist teachings are all about, how we can live in a world where there’s aging, illness, and death, repeated aging, illness, and death, separation, and that we can still find happiness inside through our own actions. That’s what that fifth contemplation is about. And it’s not a selfish quest. For one, if we don’t look for happiness inside, we’re going to be looking for it outside. You might think of the Buddha’s vision before he ordained, before he went off into the wilderness. He saw the world as being like a river that was drying up, and the fish in the river fighting over the last little bit of water. He looked around and he said everything he saw was already laid claim to. He was going to try to base his happiness on things outside. He’d have to fight other people off. So when you look for happiness inside, you don’t have to fight anybody. You have your resources inside that can bring about happiness. That’s what the Buddha discovered. And in doing so, you’re taking a weight off the world. And then you have something to offer. Look at the Buddha himself. He found true happiness and was able to console people who were suffering from it. Aging, illness, death, separation. There’s a story of a king who came to see the Buddha one time. And as he was talking with the Buddha, one of his courtiers came and whispered in his ear that his favorite queen had just died. And the king just broke down and cried. And the Buddha asked him, when was it ever the case that someone who was born will not grow old, will not get sick, will not die? It happens to everybody. And you might think that thinking of how large the problem of aging, illness, and death is would make it even heavier. But actually it doesn’t. If you feel that you’re the one who’s being singled out for these things, you wonder why. Is it that other people are not suffering from the same thing? Why are you being targeted? That’s really heavy. But they have to stop and think. Everybody else experiences these things. This is our common lot in life. Then it’s easier to rise above your own personal grief, your own personal suffering. You develop a sense of compassion. You think about all the people you meet. As you go through crowds, everybody’s lost somebody. Somebody very dear. You go over that. It gives rise to a sense of compassion. And then beyond that it goes to sanguega, which is the realization that the best course is to get out entirely. That chant we had on the reflections, or the five recollections, is only part of a sutta. The other part talks about how not only are we subject to these things, all beings are subject to these things, aging, illness, and death. No matter where you go, no matter where you might be reborn, these are the things that happen again and again and again. And we’re all heirs to our actions. The Buddha said when you think about that, it gives rise to a desire to practice the path. The desire to get out. And here’s the Buddha saying getting out is not just going for nothingness. It’s actually the highest form of happiness. So it is possible, even in the midst of all this aging, illness, and death, to find a sense of well-being inside. There’s a part of your mind that’s not touched by these things. You want to find that. And as I said earlier, it’s not a selfish thing. It helps you weather a lot of storms. And when your mind is solid like that, the people around you have something solid to lean on. So try to develop that solidity in your mind. This is why the Buddha’s instructions for mindfulness are not simply just be aware of whatever’s happening or accept whatever’s happening. It’s be selective in what you focus on thinking about. Right now all you have to think about is the breath. You have no other responsibilities. But it’s not being irresponsible. You need to develop your strength. So you’ll have something to depend on inside. And the other people have something to lean on when they need your help. So focus on the breath in and of itself. Put aside greed and distress with reverence to the world. Any thoughts related to the world at all about what you want about the world, what things you are upset about in the world? Let them go for the time being. Let the mind carries around its heavy thoughts all the time. It gets worn down. It’s like the coolies they used to have in Bangkok. You’d see them walking around in the streets sometimes. These people would have to carry huge loads on their backs to unload ships and reload ships. And they had to bend over as they worked. They’d walk and bend over all day long. And then even as they left the work, they would walk. They’d bend over. You don’t want your mind to be bent over like that. Give it some time to stand up straight and have no burdens at all for the time being. When it has a chance to rest like this, and not only rest, but also to develop its mindfulness, its alertness, its ardency. In other words, strengthen the mind inside. Then when the time comes to pick up some burdens, you don’t have to be weighed down by them. So focus right here, right now, for the time being. Not simply to escape the world, but to give the mind a chance to rest. Gather its strength. And to get to know itself well, so that when it does pick up thoughts that are heavy, you can ask yourself, why are you weighing yourself down? There are ways of thinking that are not heavy. Even when you think about heavy topics, but you can think about them in ways that don’t weigh the mind down. There’s a story of the woman who’s crying in the cemetery because her daughter was dead. The daughter’s name was Jiva, which ironically means life. And the Buddha called out to her. Eighty-four thousand people named Jiva have been buried in that cemetery. For which one of them do you grieve? Another case where a woman was mourning the death of her son. He said, the son came. You had no idea where he was coming from. When he goes, the son goes wherever his mind leads him. He didn’t use the phrase. It was like two ships passing in the night. They get close to each other, and then they go far away. You can look around. And the Buddha said, it would be hard to meet someone who hadn’t been your mother, or your father, or your sister, or your brother, or your son, or your daughter, in some previous lifetime. There was a point where you were really close to everybody you meet, but a lot of these people are very far away from you now. And how many more times do you want to have that separation? How many more times do you want to go through that suffering? The suffering simply over the death of a mother, he said. And many times it’s happened. The tears you’ve shed are more than the water of all the oceans. The same with the death of a father, brother, sister, son, daughter. It’s a lot of suffering. And it would keep coming back, coming back, coming back for more. Because we don’t see any alternative. What the Buddha is offering is that there is a good alternative. What we can find inside by developing the mind. And then you can stop the process of samsara-ing, wandering on. We tend to think of samsara as a place, but the Buddha talks about it as a process, something we do. If you think of it as a place, then it might seem selfish to try to get out of the place, leave other people behind. But when you think of it as a process, and it’s a process that causes suffering for you and the other beings in the world, as soon as you lay claim to being a being, that being has to have a world in which the being feeds. And there’s going to be conflict. If you realize you can stop this process of conflict, you don’t have to be there with a fish fighting over that water. It’s one less fish. Not only in a way, it is a gift to the world. The Buddha showed that the best thing you can do, as you train the mind, is to stop this process. It’s like an addiction. We keep coming back. Even though we keep suffering, we keep coming back, and again, and again, and again. It’s like someone who’s addicted to cocaine or heroin. They know they’re suffering, but they just can’t help themselves. The Buddha is teaching us how to overcome our addiction. Samsara is not a place that you leave. It’s an addiction that you recover from. It’s a process that causes suffering that you’ve learned how to stop. That’s the possibility that he teaches us. This path will require strength. There are a lot of things in the world that we tend to lean on. We have to realize that they won’t be around to lean on very much longer. We start life when we depend on our parents, because our bodies are too weak to do much of anything. And as we grow up, we get more and more independent, so we can stand more on our own two feet. But there will come a time when the parents leave. When we have to leave this body. What are we going to depend on then? If you have strength of mind, you have something that you can rely on, something you can trust. There’s a strength of conviction that your actions really do matter. They really do make a difference. So you want to be careful about what you do. The strength of persistence. When you see anything unskillful in the mind, you try to get rid of it. If you see anything skillful, you try to maintain it and let it grow. And to do that, you need to be mindful. And as you do it, you become more and more mindful. And you should be able to keep in mind that the really important questions in life are, what is the skillful thing to do now? There are times when the skillful thing is to help other people. There are other times when the skillful thing is to work on yourself. The Buddha gives the image of two acrobats working together, one standing on the other. In the story, the acrobat on the bottom says to the one on the top, okay, you look after me and I’ll look out after you. And in that way, we’ll be able to perform our tricks and come down safely. And the one on the top says, no, I have to look out after myself and you have to look out after yourself. In other words, each of us has to maintain our own sense of balance. And in doing so, we help one another. That’s the process of working on your mind is helping other people. There’s also a passage where the Buddha says, helping other people is a way of working on your mind. You develop qualities of goodwill, kindness, patience, equanimity. Because these are the things you need to develop as you deal with other people. And then you benefit. You focus on your own mind. That allows you to get into concentration. You let go of the affairs of the world, not because you’re heartless or because you’re selfish, but it’s because your mind needs time for itself. And then when it has time for itself, it gets to know itself and develops discernment. That’s your ultimate strength. When you see how you’ve been weighing yourself down unnecessarily, causing yourself unnecessary suffering, and you see there’s a way to stop, that’s when your mind really is strong. So work on these qualities. Conviction, persistence, mindfulness, concentration, discernment. These are things you can rely on inside. And you put yourself in a position where other people can rely on you too. So this is a practice that’s good all around. But it starts from within. So that’s where your main focus should be right now.

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